

WILTSHIRE COUNCIL

**COUNCIL
9 NOVEMBER 2010**

COUNCILLORS' QUESTIONS

**FROM COUNCILLOR PETER COLMER
CRICKLADE, LATTON & MARSTON MEYSEY DIVISION**

**TO COUNCILLOR JANE SCOTT
LEADER OF THE COUNCIL**

Question 1

How many employees have been made redundant since the migration to a unitary authority so far? What has the total cost exposure been, segmented by the component parts, redundancy payments, pay in lieu of notice, pension fund contributions etc?

Response

The total cost in the 2009-10 accounts for all redundancy and retirements was £9.5m. Note 2 to the accounts of the 2009-10 published financial statements, reported that the exceptional costs of severance relating to the move to "One Council" (LGR) was £7.1m, which can be analysed between redundancy at £6.4m and retirement at £0.7m.

The total costs in the accounts for the financial year 2010/11 to date are £2.2m. An analysis of the balances held in the accounts is shown below:

2009-10

Redundancy & Severance = £7m

Augmented Grants Early Retirement = £0.8m

Retirement Grant = £1.7m

2010-11 to date:

Redundancy & Severance = £1.3m

Augmented Grants Early Retirement = £0.9m

The total number of employees made redundant since April 2009 is 130, of which the total number of redundancies relating to LGR is 62.

TO COUNCILLOR JOHN BRADY
CABINET MEMBER FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
PLANNING AND HOUSING

Question 2

The proposed Localism Bill proposes bringing more empty homes back into use. How effective has the Empty Homes Scheme been in meeting this aspiration?

Response

Before the Localism Bill was even proposed, housing recognised that a significant priority for Wiltshire should be about making best use of existing accommodation and this included bringing back into use empty homes. Empty homes are an identified priority in both the draft Wiltshire Community Plan 2011-2016 and the Wiltshire Corporate Plan 2010-14.

Empty properties represent an unacceptable waste of resources at a time when demand for affordable housing is high. Bringing empty homes back into use is of advantage to the community (increasing the availability of housing stock) and the Council (achieving the objective of increasing the supply of housing and preventing the loss of a valuable resource).

Our council tax records from April 2010 show that Wiltshire has a minimum of 1644 homes that have been empty for more than six months. This is a minimum figure because owners do not necessarily apply for the empty property discount for council tax purposes. Because of this empty homes are difficult to identify

There are many reasons why a property might become empty for a long period of time. The houses may be empty pending the outcome of legal proceedings, either through probate or family law, or the owners have perhaps have needed to go into residential care or are incapable of managing their affairs.

Bringing empty properties back into use will increase the amount of housing available and thus reduce the number of individuals in housing need. The advantages of bringing these properties back into use include an increase in housing supply, a potential financial saving as it is often more cost effective to renovate an existing property than to build a new one, and an improvement to the environment of the area, including saving the resources required to build a new property. There are also benefits for the owner of the property as it can provide an income either through rent or sale.

The strategic housing team are currently developing an Empty Homes Strategy which will look closely at the cause and nature of empty homes and the full range of potential measures to bring empty homes back into use as

part of. It will also provide a clear approach for officers to deal proactively with properties that are left empty, including seeking information about those properties that do not show up in council tax records. Wiltshire is also working with other councils to model best practice approaches and to use these as exemplars. This new Empty Homes Strategy will seek to ensure that the different departments of the Council involved in an empty home case will act in a co-ordinated and clear way.

The target is, through Council intervention, to bring back into use 50 long-term empty homes (those empty for more than 6 months) by 2014. The focus of this work is on long-term empty homes, which are defined as those properties whose owners have been in direct contact with the Council on more than five occasions. Achievement of this target is dependant on officer resources being available to implement the strategy.

We have obtained approval to recruit a full time empty homes manager but due to the current management restructures it was agreed we should place this post on hold so that those who are affected will have the option to apply. For the past few months a member of the private sector housing team has been prioritising work related to empty homes and has been able to send letters to nearly all landlords / owners who have an empty home encouraging them to bring them back into use. We are also in the middle of doing a survey with our town and parish councils to try and identify further empty homes in the area so that appropriate action can be made to get them back into use.

Within the corporate plan we now record the total amount of non local authority owned vacant dwellings returned to occupation or demolished during the financial year as a result of action by the local authority. Since April 2010 we have recorded 190 properties being returned to use and anticipate a total of 470 by the end of this financial year.

**TO COUNCILLOR FLEUR DE RHE-PHILIPPE, CABINET MEMBER FOR
FINANCE, PERFORMANCE AND RISK**

Question 3

Why is factually incorrect information being stated in public meetings?

The background to this is that at cabinet on 27th. July, I asked if there was any risk to the income stream for car parking as no adverse full year variance was being indicated. The response was that there was no risk as the current position was due to phasing. At cabinet on 18th. September I asked the same question as there was now an adverse variance, the cabinet member's response was that this was due purely to VAT changes. I followed up this response with the Finance Department, which confirmed that this response was incorrect, the VAT change only being a minor element of the shortfall. Again at cabinet on 27th. July I asked for an explanation regarding the shortfall in income relating to Development Services, the response being that this was due to purely a shortfall in planning applications submitted. I followed up this response with the Finance Department, which confirmed that this response was incorrect, the planning applications only being one element of the shortfall of income.

Response

When the first monitoring report was provided the period of monitoring was broadly in line with demand but there was a delay in increasing charges that had not filtered through and as such it was forecast the increase would cover the shortfall of lost income. Unfortunately the level of historical records on demand has been limited and as such this has hampered effective demand and forecast analysis. I cannot explain why the later meeting was explained as purely a VAT effect. There was then a further follow up by Central Finance with DNP to investigate the variance which identified the position reported to Members in later months re £500k shortfall projection in car parking and £50k due to VAT rates rising in January 2011 and being absorbed. As far as I can make out this arose largely due to a timing issue of sharing information between Finance teams and briefing the portfolio holder and Cllr Colmer's question. I have addressed the matter and requested that all future reports and briefings are improved both in terms of level of transparency and detail behind. The continued restructure of Finance will also help with improvements in Communications.

Regarding Development Control the issue of shortfall again is complicated by several factors and it is not just a drop in applications, although this is a key factor that has consequential impacts. The cause of the confusion for members is again routed in communication within Finance and I am addressing this and apologise.